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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the history of American documentary films and examines several specific films. Any documentary has the primary job of reacting a virtual reality and maintaining an impression of immediate experience. While this has remained a constant requirement, the formal conventions which filmmakers use to create the virtual reality have evolved and changed, so that devices that might have been accepted as realistic thirty years ago seem suspect when compared to the norms of realism Americans have absorbed from today's films. At least two distinct categories of documentary style are distinguishable today: analytic cinema and direct cinema. Analytic cinema includes all documentaries that obtain their effects through the conjunctive use of image, a spoken narration or commentary, and usually music. Direct cinema creates a virtual reality with conventions seemingly unmediated by film technique and opposite to those of analytic cinema. Some of the films discussed include "Why We Fight," "The River," "Black Natchez," "Don't Look Back," "Titicut Follies," "High School," "Chronicle of a Summer," "And So They Live," "Jaguar," "Eddie," "On the Pole," and "Primate." (TS)

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Directed and Direct: Changing Conventions in the American Documentary

by Randall Conrad

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AND SO THEY LIVE by John Ferno and Julian Roffman

"Directed and Direct: Changing Conventions in the American Documentary," the third paper to be published from the University Film Study Center's Research Program, is a condensed and revised version of Randall Conrad's presentation, "Documentary Realism: Changing Conventions in the Documentary," delivered at the Symposium on The American Documentary held at Brandeis University in February, 1972.

Randall Conrad has taught filmmaking at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and film history at Tufts College of Special Studies. His own films include THREE THOUSAND YEARS AND LIFE and CUTTING UP OLD TOUCHES.

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Nancy Legge

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Any documentary has the primary job of creating a virtual reality, of maintaining an impression of immediate experience. While this has remained a constant requirement, the formal conventions which filmmakers use to create that virtual reality have evolved and changed, so that devices that might have been accepted as normal and realistic thirty years ago seem suspect when compared to the norms of realism we have absorbed from today's films.

Documentary has in fact today become an almost useless term covering an extreme range of film forms. At least two distinct categories of documentary style must be distinguished today: analytic cinema, which was once the universal norm, and direct cinema, still being explored and refined. (Cinema verite, the original term for direct cinema, I prefer to reserve for only one particular form of direct cinema.)

Analytic cinema includes all documentaries that obtain their effects through the conjunctive use of image, a spoken narration or commentary, and usually music. Direct cinema is no less composed of conventions, but the virtual reality is a radically different one--seemingly unmediated by film technique--and the conventions are accordingly different, indeed opposite to those of analytic cinema. The newer form of documentary emerged in the 1940's but was not commonly identifiable until the early 1960's.

The analytic style of film leaves open all possibilities of intervention on the part of the filmmaker, not only techniques that can create symbolism, ironic contrast, shock effects and in general an unremitting control of our experience by the director, but also the very real possibility of the filmmaker abusing his responsibility by loading the dice. This is why critics in the 1940's could distinguish between the Italian neorealist films (which in their time were seen as a radical departure from analytic cinema) on the one hand and "propaganda films"--bluntly lumped together--on the other.

Neorealism, Robert Warshow writes, is passive towards experience, while American films are aggressive. Of course he is speaking about fiction films, Hollywood films. And yet to illustrate the aggressive film, Warshow turns immediately to documentary, writing about the role of the narrator in American newsreels.

"A typical figure in our culture is the 'commentator, whose accepted function is to make some 'appropriate' statement about whatever is presented to his attention. 'Grim evidence of man's inhumanity to man,' he remarks of the corpses at Buchenwald. 'The end of the road,' he says as we stare at dead Mussolini on the newsreel screen. (And what can one do but agree?) Even in its most solemn and pessimistic statements, this voice is still a form of 'affirmation' (its healthy tone betrays it); at bottom, it is always saying the same thing: that one never need be entirely passive, that for every experience there is some adequate response; at the very least, there is always--there must be--something to say."[1]

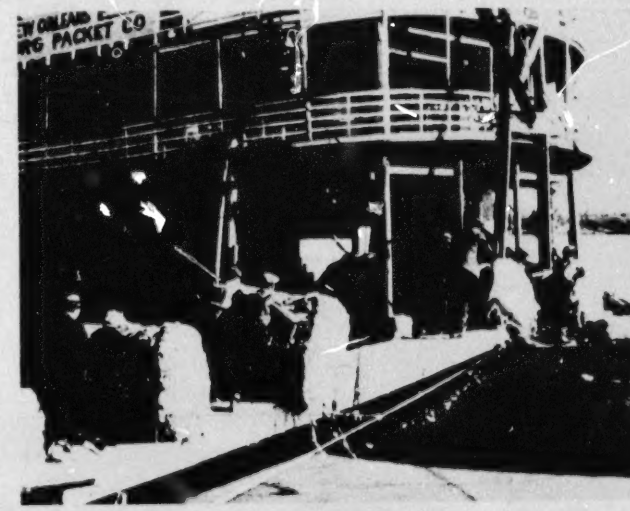
Thus, paradoxically, Warshow takes documentary as the opposite pole from a film style which is faithful to experience. It is significant that he takes the commentator as the most typical element in the analytic film, in which, as he says, ideas "cushion" the facts. The use of a spoken narration is the most obvious example of an "analytic" device which in fact immediately oversteps its realistic function and takes it upon itself to interpret--ultimately to make sure that the virtual reality on the screen is filled with a determined system of values.

The newsreels are the most blatant examples of using narration to read meanings and emotions into every bit of footage, even the most banal shots. When we come to the more elaborate documentaries of the period, the use of analytic devices is more varied. The omniscient narrator is still with us, although spoken narration becomes only one among several chief devices for ordering and selectively interpreting a phenomenon.

In the realm of content, we move from having to cover a news item to the problem of dramatizing the presentation of broader realities, for example the erosion of soil along the Mississippi, or the problem of bringing electric power to isolated farms, or America's entry into World War Two.

In the realm of style, therefore, the filmmaker now has considerable freedom to control the expressive value of the shots he takes and to utilize their pictorial composition, their analogies and contrasts and their symbolic value. He has the freedom to articulate those shots around certain lines of interest. He can also compile preexisting footage and rearrange it. And he is free to reenact or stage scenes for purely expressive and dramatic purposes.

For example, in Pare Lorentz's THE RIVER, there is an early sequence showing baled cotton being loaded onto a river boat. You can see from the variety of shots and



MOMA/Film Stills Archive

THE RIVER by Pare Lorentz

the composed camera angles that this labor was not filmed spontaneously, but reenacted and filmed selectively. This was accepted documentary practice at that time.[2] It's also interesting that THE RIVER uses this sequence as if it were archive footage illustrating historical material: the scenes of loading cotton were of course shot in the present, but the narrator is talking about pre-Civil War farming, so that the scenes seem to exist in the present and in past history at the same time. And we are inclined to interpret the sheer hardness and repetitiveness of the manual labor as something typical of past agriculture. A second cotton sequence much later in THE RIVER, definitely located in the present day by the commentary, uses shots taken from about the same angles, but featuring mechanized loading ramps prominently in the foreground.

These documentaries were invariably made to dramatize a real and specific problem for an audience that was not directly affected by the problem and indeed was considered hostile to the solution being proposed. Lorentz's films publicized New Deal measures, as did Ivens's POWER AND THE LAND. PRELUDE TO WAR, the first film in the WHY WE FIGHT series, was calculated to win Americans away from isolationism. So the historical dramatization is naturally couched in terms of the specific solutions and structured to lead up to them: any other set of circumstances, any other contradictions become irrelevant. When you read critics of the period praising the "epic" scope of these documentaries, they are generally reacting to this art of foreshortening history.

What typifies the reenacted documentary is that all the elements of the film are mobilized to give a strongly felt continuity to a necessarily abstract argument. The WHY WE FIGHT series is a good example of how analytic techniques function in the ambivalent roles of conveyor of information, vehicle of emotional identification, and mobilizer of ideas toward a definite purpose. The pretext of PRELUDE TO WAR is that of any documentary: setting forth information for the public, exploring the reasons behind a situation: why we fight.

A title vouches for historical accuracy and even for the "authentication" of reenacted scenes! What really happens, however, is that beneath the pretext of a reasoned and earnest exploration of history, a whole ideology is brought to life which has nothing to do with any real look at history but instead consists of deliberately reinforcing a set of cultural cliches in order to mobilize a purely emotional support for the new war effort.

This reinforcement is a good example of what Warshow meant when he said that American films put ideas first: every issue which the film relates to the war is idealized. America's decision to fight is seen as the natural outcome of a traditional commitment to political freedom. History itself is idealized. The real subject of PRELUDE TO WAR is neither history nor international relations. The film identifies political freedom with a handful of cultural stereotypes which are mostly bound up with an idealized vision of the family structure, for example shots of children having fun in a playground, complete with squeals of laughter on the sound track.

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PRELUDE TO WAR by Frank Capra

Every such image of freedom in America is neatly contrasted to society in the "slave" states. Image, commentary, and variations in the music all work together to bring these contrasts to life. The children in the playground are juxtaposed with shots of children playing war games with gas masks. There is also a strong appeal to religion: Americans have freedom to worship, while in Germany they bomb churches. Here the film uses staged detail shots of churches being sacked. Nowhere is there any mention of anti-Semitism as a part of Nazi ideology. In the staged shots we see a temple being destroyed, but only as part of a sequence including Protestant churches and others. The function of analytic techniques in PRELUDE TO WAR is not to present the realities in Europe but to assimilate them to "American" images.

It is taken for granted by the filmmakers that the task of convincing Americans that they have any real common bond with the people of other nations is hopeless. PRELUDE TO WAR, far from making the least effort to create international understanding, remains totally within the bounds of national insularity. It doesn't do away with national prejudices, it reinforces them and turns them into weapons against the new enemy. And significantly--this is easily taken for granted in watching older films--all the American children, families and "man in the street" interviews, all these human embodiments of freedom, are strictly white Americans, as is the narrator. PRELUDE TO WAR outdoes the isolationists for national suprematism: it's really a prelude to imperialism.

The function of the commentator in all these films has not changed substantially from the omniscient, assertive newsreel voice. It does undergo variations, though, intended to better disguise the omniscience and the ultimate purpose of orienting our judgments. The voice in a Pare Lorentz film takes the part of different figures: sometimes the omniscient commentator; sometimes addressing the farmers or the settlers in the film rhetorically; sometimes imitating a particular figure like a parade ground speaker or the emergency radio signaler in THE RIVER; and sometimes--using that opaque, unreflecting oratory and peculiar folksy style that seem to have passed for poetic prose among some writers of the period--trying for poetic rhythm, as in the roll call of the names of trees, rivers, and cities in THE RIVER.

In THE RIVER, in PRELUDE TO WAR, in POWER AND THE LAND, indeed in every analytic film, a commentary or narration is a parasite upon the image, always trying to turn the visual content to its own uses. No matter what form the narration adopts, basically it has a redundant character. This is not in itself negative. It is simply a characteristic of the film form, and indeed narration has occasionally been used in the service of a more open cinema, one which does not preempt our intellect but leaves something to our imagination. Any form of third person narration can be a positive element if it acknowledges its redundant position and if it creatively uses its inherent limitations instead of trying to impress us with its omniscience.

What about the image itself? The commentary is what creates a point of view in a verbal and ideological sense, but it is, after all, the visual units that have to serve the essential functions of creating our virtual sense of space and time. In the compilation film, which relies on putting together preexisting footage, the camera is everywhere and its overall perspective is undetermined. It is the process of editing that finds a way of unifying the shots. If the material is drawn from a wide enough range of sources, as in the WHY WE FIGHT films, some remarkable effects can be created in the editing, like cutting very different activities together on a similar physical movement. The shots are selected for their content, their potential interrelation and symbolic value. If the filmmaker is lucky, he will find similar camera movements, but in general the spatial definition created by the camera will be unpredictable from shot to shot. Our perspective is thus necessarily that of a survey, an overview.

In a directed and dramatized documentary like POWER AND THE LAND, on the other hand, the filming itself is controlled. The action is more or less rehearsed and the directing is done with every intention of breaking down or analyzing the action spatially and temporally, as in fiction film. Selection of camera positions and distances, lighting effects, devices for continuity--in other words not only editing but all the structuring devices which the editing brings out--becomes the key

factor in creating a virtual reality in this type of film, which is very close to fiction film.

In one typical sequence in POWER AND THE LAND, the camerawork and the editing operate exactly as in a fiction film. The sequence, about a dozen shots, takes place at the end of a typical day on a farm which has no electricity. The family eats supper. The farmer and his oldest son then leave to do the evening chores outside, while the mother and school children stay at the table and the kids begin to do their homework.

MOMA/Film Stills Archive

POWER AND THE LAND by Joris Ivens

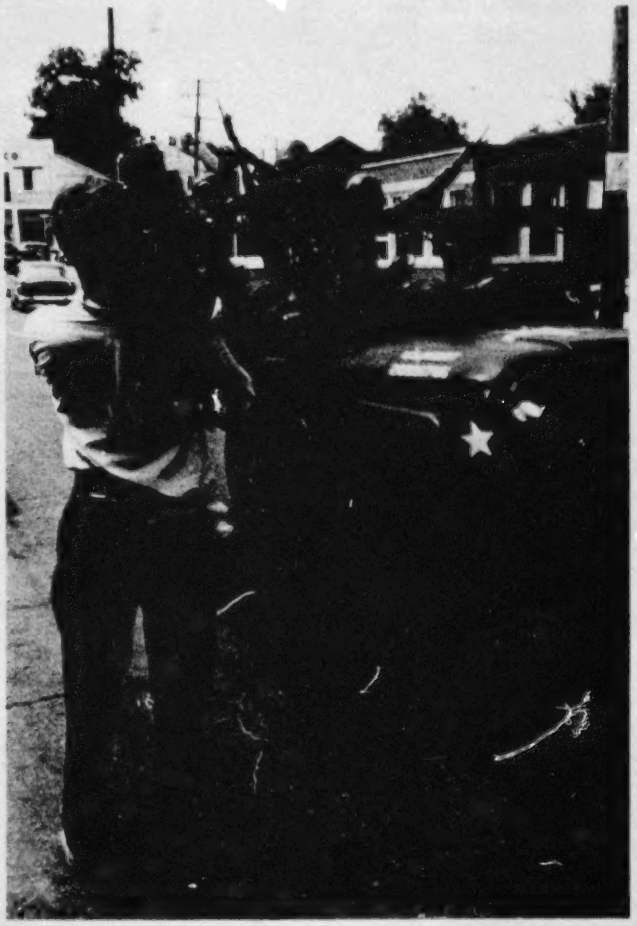
The camera distance changes from group shots to closer shots of individuals and back again, with dramatic cutaways to simultaneous action elsewhere at two points: the mother still at the stove when the family sits at the table, and later the father and son seen outside while the others stay indoors. Every shot is a single component in an overall continuity: nothing is random. Even the one shot that seems at first to have been left in as a kind of "pure" cinematic moment--where the father takes leave and the camera simply remains on the mother's thoughtful face as she finishes eating--turns out to be a set-up for the next indoor sequence in which she watches her children do their homework at the same table. Seen without the sound track, the sequence is as self-sufficient as a scene from any silent film. The unity and meaning of the events are so well established visually that the commentary can add nothing.

And indeed, where the directing by itself is calculated to bring us close to the family and make us feel the lack of adequate light visually, the commentary fails to bring us any closer with its ponderous indirect discourse and poetic repetition, much less with its homilies about what is supposed to be typical in the family we're trying to watch.[3] All it does is insist on what is "American" about them; the writer supposes this is the only way we other Americans are going to sympathize with them. It amounts to a contempt for the particular reality of this family's life and for our own capacity to feel our own emotions about it. Opponents of the directed documentary, however, would further argue that Ivens's analytic visual presentation is no less an obstacle between ourselves and the filmed reality.

* * *

I have dwelt at length on the role of spoken commentary in analytic documentary because in defining direct cinema, it is easiest to begin with the most obvious technical difference: absence of commentary. Direct cinema originated at a time when it was still difficult but not impossible to record sound directly and synchronously with the picture, at the location itself.

With the use of directly recorded sound as a stylistic constant, a new style is created with its own requirements of realism affecting the visual components. The intervention of the filmmaker takes place at quite a different level from analytic cinema. Respecting con-



BLACK NATCHEZ by Ed Pincus and David Neuman

tinuity of sound and image implies respecting the natural unfolding of the event being filmed. Each scene is filmed for as long as possible and the scenes as finally edited tend to be unbroken also. The composing and the editing of the footage in any but the most unobtrusive way amount to an intervention from outside which the viewer feels much more strongly than in analytic documentary. The filmmaker is now obliged to reject a multitude of editing effects which were formerly standard practice in recreating a given reality: analytic editing, especially juxtaposition of things for association, contrast, and symbolic meaning. On the level of content, the standard pretext of the documentary also disappears: that of conveying specific information in a specifically ordered way. The situations and people that we see in direct documentaries are given more or less in a block, and it is we who must infer "verbal" information about background, relationships and feelings solely on the basis of what we are given to see and hear directly.

Here the parallel with critical evaluations of neorealism becomes clear. Basically it is no longer the film which gives structure to the reality, but the reality which determines the form of the film, at least ideally. Ideally, therefore, the new criterion of authenticity--the virtual reality--lies in the filmed record itself and in our presumably unmediated confronta-

tion with it. We become witnesses while the camera and the filmmaker become neutral recorders. Of course even in the most direct documentaries there is a great deal of selection and structuring going on, but none of this intervention contradicts the unbroken illusion of immediate presence, which is essential to direct documentary.

But is this its real esthetic basis? In two decades of direct cinema, the goals and esthetics of the new documentary form are still being defined in confusing and contradictory ways. We can, however, begin to identify them more accurately now that the conventions of the form have reached a point of consolidation and further evolution--a tradition.

Direct cinema got its reputation for originality from the unmediated way in which it invariably portrayed its realities. The camera was invisible; the director, ideally, was his own camera operator; the subjects were unaware they were being filmed. The filmmker prejudged nothing during shooting or editing; the burden of value judgment shifted to the viewer, just as Andre Bazin said it did in neorealist fiction film.

These were the characteristics which first helped to popularize direct cinema. The original direct documentaries made by Leacock and Pennebaker and other filmmakers for Drew Associates (even though they were promptly overnarrated and overedited in the analytic tradition by the producers) were billed as "The Living Camera": the immediacy of the event, the invisibility of technique, and the nonintervention of the filmmakers were the most striking new characteristics. This led critics[4] to see direct cinema as an innovative recording technique, a sophisticated ethnological tool, while detractors accused the filmmakers of hypocrisy in pretending to neutrality.

The filmmakers themselves concentrated on developing this aspect of their experiment. They, too, elaborated the idea that the subjects were, and ought to be, unaware of being filmed. The Drew Associates' teams arrived at a theory whereby the ideal direct cinema consisted either of pursuing the subjects over a long period, in which case they became used to the presence of camera and sound recorder, or of capturing them in moments of crisis so that they were likewise unself-conscious.

In retrospect, the real innovation and enduring interest of even the early direct documentaries seems rather to consist in a more complex relationship between filmmaker and subject. Direct documentaries, it is true, continue to pose for the public as invisible, neutral documents, but the filmmakers paradoxically emphasize the personal character of their work. Frederick Wiseman, for example, readily states that his films are "subjective."

The direct filmmaker, as we might have suspected, does indeed intervene, not only in editing (where intervention is most easily spotted) but in the filming. Not by determining shots in advance, perhaps not even in any intentional way, but at least by the very presence of the camera, which after all is never invisible no matter how portable the equipment and minimal the crew. As a result the subjects are usually aware of being filmed to a greater degree than was once supposed, and direct documentaries are suffused with a subtle spectrum of camera-subject relationships.

Stephen Mamber, a painstaking historian of direct cinema,[5] finds "three different levels of camera awareness" in the subject of one film alone, Eddie Sachs in the 1960 ON THE POLE by Leacock and Pennebaker (produced by Robert Drew). At times Sachs addresses the camera, seeking to present a definite self-image; at times he may indeed have forgotten the camera's presence; and on one occasion he painfully pretends to ignore it although the viewer knows he is aware of it. These shades of camera awareness (except the first) are perhaps lost on the average viewer simply because he is not conditioned to attribute value to them--or even to notice them at all. But they create an essential characteristic of direct cinema, even if they seem to stand in contradiction to other aspects of this film form. Exploration of subjectivity through an articulated range of interventions, and even elements of technical self-consciousness, are most easily found in ON THE POLE, JANE, HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY, and DON'T LOOK BACK. And they exist, less articulately, in other direct cinema of the 1960's. Yet perversely enough they are masked, denied as it were, precisely by the effort to keep all technique invisible.

Pennebaker, Inc.

DON'T LOOK BACK by D.A. Pennebaker

We notice this tension particularly in examining the editing of films by Leacock, Pennebaker and Wiseman. Ideally the editing is invisible, serving chiefly to sustain the vital illusion of uninterrupted real time and of spatial continuity inherent in the long takes characteristic of direct filming. But in practice, it often happens that when the editor tries to make a sequence of different shots and cutaways look like an unbroken continuum--in some parts of DON'T LOOK BACK and A STRAVINSKY PORTRAIT, for example--the result can look clumsy or strained, calling attention to itself precisely when it should be least visible.

It is as if editing has become no more than a necessary evil, a concession to narrative actually antagonistic to the interests which motivated the original filming. Yet it is still some process of editing which must discover the meaning and potential form embedded in the blocks of reality which were filmed. A particularly clear instance of this discrepancy occurs whenever the filmmaker is not sure of the legibility of his raw material. In these cases the filmmaker borrows devices from the classic resources of analytic editing (parallel cutting and so forth).

There is a remarkable example of this in Wiseman's TITICUT FOLLIES. In one scene an elderly inmate of the institution has withdrawn to such a point that he

refuses nourishment. He is then secured to an operating table and force-fed in the same unsanitary conditions we have observed throughout the documentary. This is an excruciating process to watch, yet Wiseman felt that some power was still missing from it and decided not to leave it uncut. In order to reinforce a polemical statement, as if the cruelty of this operation were not enough in itself, Wiseman intercuts visually similar scenes of the same man being prepared for burial after he has died.

I think the device of cross cutting amounts to a miscalculation of effect in this direct documentary. The manipulation of the footage feels like a break in style, a use of an alien form of cinematic language, and it makes its more abstract point only at the price of weakening the inherent power of the scene. That power could only have been preserved by leaving the scenes uncut as discrete units, and letting the parallel between the feeding and the embalming be discovered naturally by the viewer.

Wiseman's progress as a filmmaker is a study in solutions to the contradictions in direct cinema. Critics--even Mamber--treat Wiseman's films interchangeably, yet there is a significant evolution from the early to the later films. In all of them, invisible technique disguises a decidedly aggressive and polemical filmmaker. A filmmaker who definitely affects and provokes the behavior of his subjects simply by being present with the camera. In TITICUT FOLLIES, for example, an inmate addresses a disturbing monologue directly to the camera and it serves a definite polemical purpose at its particular point in the film. (It may even symbolize the pros and cons of direct documentary: the unmediated confrontation between ourselves and the camera-conscious inmate reinforces Wiseman's polemic about who is sane and who is insane--the monologue has a semblance of reason--but gives us, necessarily, no clinical or social comprehension of the issue or the individual: is he typical?) The guards, too, perform for the camera, clearly aware they are being filmed although notoriously unaware of how their filmed image will appear to most viewers.

More obviously than the shooting, however, Wiseman's editing of his earlier films betrays the intentionality he wishes to conceal. He never repeats the overcalculated effect of cross cutting that I mentioned in TITICUT FOLLIES, but the editing of HIGH SCHOOL for example treads an uneasy compromise between an illusion of simple chronological or thematic sequence and a polemical juxtaposition, notably in using pointedly sarcastic and sometimes facile links from one scene to the next.

Zipporah Films

PRIMATE by Frederick Wiseman

Wiseman's latest films--JUVENILE COURT, PRIMATE, and WELFARE--are much more confident structurally. Sequences are plainly offered as studies of interactions or of individual comportment. The camera's presence, as always, is very much a catalyst: to it we owe the self-consciousness of the scientists in PRIMATE and the desperate monologue at the end of WELFARE. But most interesting, Wiseman has rediscovered increasing uses of conventional analytic devices. WELFARE contains montage sequences, symbolic accumulations of composed shots advancing an artifical time scheme or counterpointing a discussion. PRIMATE contains the classic point of view (or subject-to-object) editing which was spurned as artificial by direct cinema purists. And PRIMATE even contains--exceptionally in Wiseman and in nearly all direct cinema, properly defined--an interview addressed to the camera.

It is simply that Wiseman has learned to integrate these analytic devices gracefully so that they heighten rather than contradict the direct cinema scenes, which he can therefore afford to let stand as elements in themselves. In PRIMATE, the "interview" (for want of

Zipporah Films

HIGH SCHOOL by Frederick Wiseman

Zipporah Films

WELFARE by Frederick Wiseman

a more exact term: actually the off-camera question has been edited out so the answer, spoken to the filmmaker, seems like a spontaneous discussion) is filmed and edited to look no different from situations like the executive meeting in another sequence, in which the scientists talk to each other rather than to the filmmaker.

A separate form of direct cinema consists of films in which the voice of a principal character (as distinct from any omniscient narrator) is used to create some particular slant on the events we are watching. In effect this device adds a retrospective and self-conscious dimension to the screen reality. It envelops it in one particular consciousness with which we can identify separately, yet without feeling that it is imposed from outside since it still seems to arise from the immediate event. (Thus we are very far from the nearest analytic equivalent, the indirect discourse of the narrating voice in Lorentz or Ivens.) In the best cases of this form of direct documentary, we are free to draw our own reactions from a synthesis of the immediate event and the protagonist's interpretation of it. An example of this form in American documentary is BLACK NATCHEZ by Edward Pincus and David Neuman. The outstanding examples in European documentary are Jean Rouch's JAGUAR and MOI UN NOIR. Both Rouch and Pincus obtained this effect by recording, during editing sessions, the protagonists' spoken reactions to events in the footage, and then incorporating these reactions into the finished film as first-person commentary.

BLACK NATCHEZ by Ed Pincus and David Neuman

One form of direct cinema is categorically different from all the others even though the same technical innovations originally made it possible. It is widespread in documentary and a staple of TV reportage. This is the interview addressed to the camera. In its more banal forms, the interview is perhaps the most easily abused form of direct cinema. Our respect for an individual expressing an opinion is reinforced by the immediacy of that person's presence. In a context that suggests, moreover, that the opinion expressed is typical of many, we seldom ask ourselves how manipulative the experience actually is.

The interview, however, lies at the basis of cinema verite, a type of direct documentary in which the interview is not confined to simple questions and answers but soon disappears in favor of an immediate, spontaneous and hopefully deeper relationship between the individual, supremely camera-conscious, and the camera. The first film to have pushed the interview situation to the extremes of its contradictory nature is Rouch's CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER. The entire documentary is a series of extensive interviews; the questions are so incessant and probing that the people interviewed finally become conscious that their first answers were half-truths and evasions. Often they break down before the camera and disclose a more intimate level of self-consciousness. Hence the name cinema verite is best confined to this genre, for which is was originally coined. CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER opened the way for one form of direct cinema in which the key factor is explicitly the camera-subject relationship.

BLACK NATCHEZ by Ed Pincus and David Neuman

* * *

I mentioned that the camera-subject relationship, so long concealed by the novel illusion of invisible filmmaking, is being more consciously explored today. The past few years have seen a wave of portrait films by independent filmmakers borrowing and adapting the techniques of direct cinema. The portraits are of everyday individuals. Often they attempt to make explicit use of the subject's camera awareness, complemented sometimes by the filmmaker's own intervention--exploring or provoking, becoming an active participant in the relationship.

The extremes of possibility in portrait films reflect the difference between direct and analytic documentary techniques. One extreme, using pure direct cinema, is represented by Edward Pincus and David Neuman's PANOLA. There is an extraordinary amount of camera awareness on the part of the subject and a camera technique which at times tries to oblige and encourage that awareness and at other times tries to take a considerable distance from the subject. Although ultimately we are challenged to arrive at our own perspective about Panola and his monologues, the most consistent effect of this portrait is that of a polemical shock-confrontation (like the inmate's monologue to us in TITICUT FOLLIES). It either thrusts Panola upon us or makes us distant from him, but never quite offers us a free relationship to him.

The other extreme could be represented by a number of portraits which use direct cinema techniques for the purpose of penetrating normally inaccessible situations and persons, but basically return to analytic devices to condense, amplify and symbolize. One example is

Peter Barton's EDDIE, which uses Eddie's voice on the sound track as a virtual interior monologue. Memories, fantasies and fears are projected onto the urban environment. Then at one point he overlaps this voice with the voices of other unidentified persons like Eddie, achieving an eerie synthesis of objective statement (there are many people in Eddie's predicament) and subjectivity (Eddie seems to multiply, or to break up into infinite fragments).

An amateur theater therapy situation lends itself to a highly articulated camera-subject relationship in Martin Ostrow's SOME OF THESE DAYS; an aggressive, controlled camera--seemingly an alienating presence--actually becomes an intimate participant in a complex interrelation between therapist, patients and filmmaker.

Like these examples, most portraits are mixtures of direct (or pseudo-direct) and analytic cinema. The subjects' self-expression before the camera is spontaneous, but it is immediately circumscribed by external sequences analytically filmed and edited--the filmmaker's own determined interpretation of the situation. One such portrait is Mary Feldhaus-Weber's DIANE, which edits a variety of disparate footage involving many levels of camera awareness into a mosaic, a mimesis of the psychological patterns which the filmmaker finds in Diane's spoken comments. Another example is Jody Saslow's CROSBY STREET: a variety of people express themselves freely in conventional interview situations, yet the filmmaker's controlled shooting and editing create a thoroughly ironic perspective on that freedom--at the same time turning Crosby Street into a microcosm of urban society.

* * *

Not only most portraits, but indeed most documentaries today are careful mixtures of direct and analytic film styles. They can only be mixtures because there is no way of completely synthesizing the two. Even films which could choose to use only analytic techniques now look for ways to include interviews and other direct cinema devices to make their films more immediate.

MOMA/Film Stills Archive

AND SO THEY LIVE by John Ferno and Julian Roffman

MOMA/Film Stills Archive

AND SO THEY LIVE by John Ferno and Julian Roffman

It is especially interesting, therefore, to find an antecedent of the mixed style at a point in the history of documentary when direct cinema had just emerged alongside analytic cinema. In the 1940's one began to see films--though rarely--which mixed a few direct scenes into a basically analytic framework.

AND SO THEY LIVE is a short film that was made in 1941--which makes it a contemporary of POWER AND THE LAND--to dramatize the vicious cycle of poverty among the farmers in rural Kentucky, and ultimately as part of a project to publicize experimental educational reform in the local schools.

There are two or three scenes of direct cinema in AND SO THEY LIVE and only one is an interview. Another is a direct filming of the day's lessons in the schoolroom, which is the film's most interesting use of direct cinema; the third is a long final scene inside the family's house, sustained only by live sound.

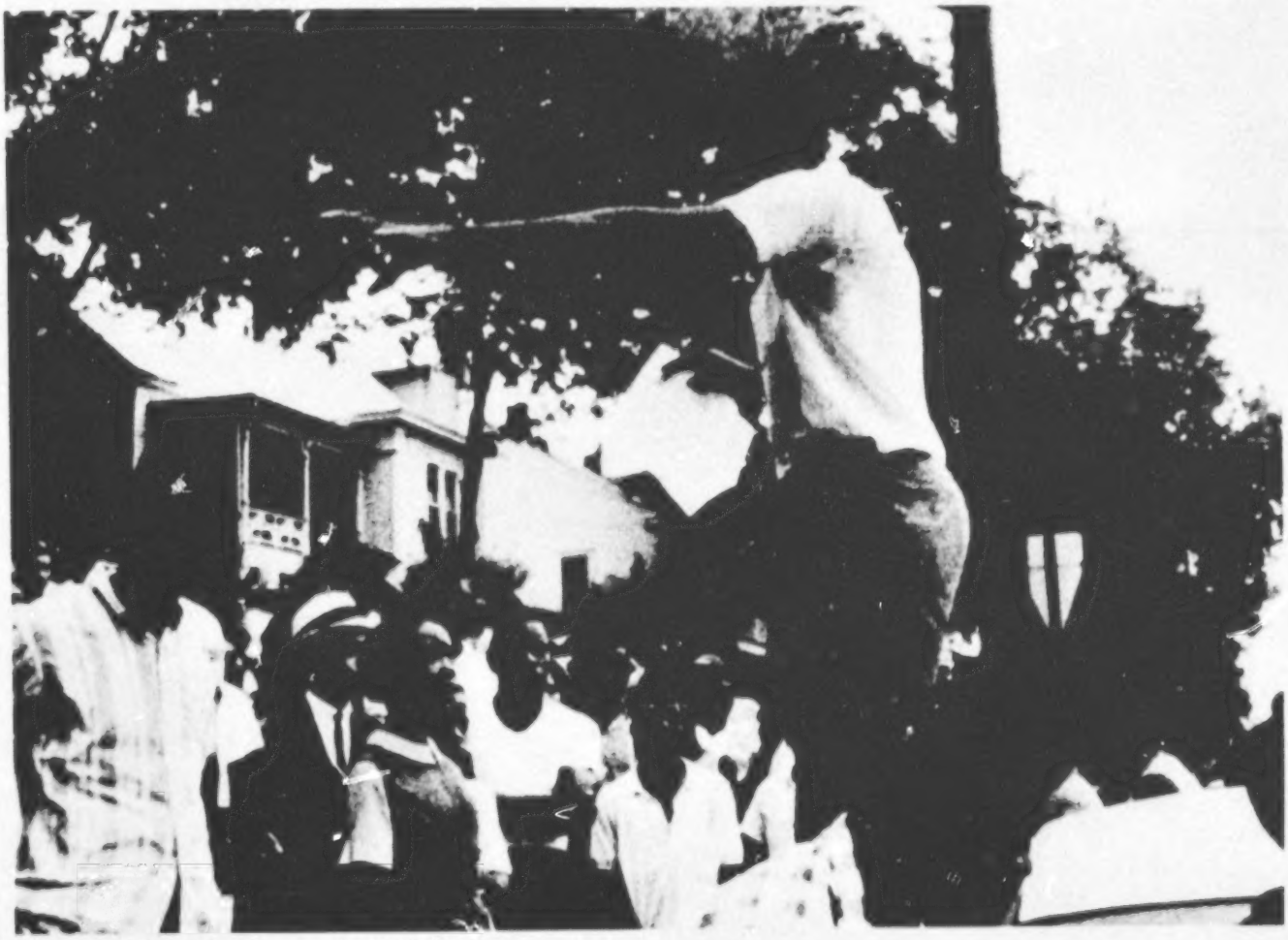
The film takes as one of its basic themes the enormous discrepancy between what is taught in the school and the real hardships of the children and their parents. This is not only the content: it becomes a structuring device in the film itself. And in one sequence this device makes use of the difference between analytic and direct styles. AND SO THEY LIVE, at least in parts, makes use of understatement and irony in its spoken narration and visual counterpoints. Analytic editing of the scenes in the schoolroom, for example, creates contrasts between the idealized geography lesson and the real poverty: detail shots of the children's makeshift footwear are contrasted with the shoes of children in the geography illustration, and so forth.[6]

These may appear as isolated touches at first, well within the conventions of the analytic documentary, all the more typical as the inevitable commentator has already stated in so many words that the lessons are unrelated to real problems. But from this point, the analytic device of editing for contrast is carried over to the rest of the sequence as a whole: the geography lesson--which was filmed and recorded directly--is now

intercut with the "real" documentary (with a narrating voice) as it gives the specific history behind the farm land of the region and the causes of the present impoverishment. Thus the direct and the analytic styles find a reciprocal reinforcement in the ironic parallel structure.

The narrating voice too, at least in some sequences, is used in a way that comes close to what I meant when I said that the best narration is conscious of its limitations, its redundant character. It actually exploits that character as a structuring device, so that we as viewers have some margin of freedom in discovering for ourselves a relationship between what is asserted and what is being shown. When the narration begins to talk about the role of education over shots of the children on their way to school, it uses the most high-minded language to speak about assimilating "the best thought of the world" and bringing it home. It is as if the writer was mercifully unaware of the absurdity of such ideals in a context like this. We begin to think that we're in for another typical New Deal documentary with that fundamentally assertive, idealizing commentary that Warshow found symptomatic of American culture. The irony of the opening remarks crystallizes only after we have experienced the schoolroom scenes with their contrasts. And for this to happen, it was necessary that the reality of the schoolroom have a different texture from the narrated sequences. And this is precisely what direct cinema contributes to this film. Finally, the direct technique in the English lesson, with the actual voices and their intonations, contains an irony by its very nature which no amount of analytic cinema could have created: the simple reality of hearing the children take turns mechanically reading stanzas from Chaucer in their Kentucky accents (and looking at their faces and clothing and surroundings as they read aloud) becomes a natural indictment of this meaningless education.

In making this survey of documentary conventions, I have not tried to imply that one form is superior to the other, nor have I argued that the era of analytic documentary is closed and that the authority of direct cinema is now supreme. It is true that direct cinema has forced us to take a critical look at the nature of documentary film. And I do think that there is a conflict between direct and analytic styles, a conflict that filmmakers working today feel very strongly. But as I have stated, there is no way to synthesize the two styles and most successful documentaries will continue to investigate the cinematic possibilities of both.



BLACK NATCHEZ by Ed Pincus and David Neuman

Notes

1. Robert Warshow, "Paisan," The Immediate Experience, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970, p. 190.
2. The reenactment of the cotton loading is described in Pare Lorentz and the Documentary Film by Robert L. Snyder, University of Oklahoma Press, 1968, pp. 55-56. See also Joris Ivens's defense of reenacted documentary in his autobiography, The Camera and I, International Publishers, 1969.
3. Unlike Lorentz, who waited until the commentary was written and the musical score composed before editing his footage, Ivens had virtually completed the film editing before the writer and composer made their additions. See Snyder, pp. 129-130.
4. Louis Marcorelles, Living Cinema: New Directions in Contemporary Filmmaking, Praeger Publishers, 1973.
5. Steven Mamber, Cinema Verite in America, The MIT Press, 1974.
6. This sequence is strikingly like the schoolroom sequence in Bunuel's LAND WITHOUT BREAD (1932) in its selection and structuring of detail shots (the ragged clothes and feet, the absurd geography pictures on the wall) and its pointed use of the narrating voice.

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THE RIVER by Pare Lorentz

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